

Why AV does not necessarily produce more coalition governments. Nor does it help small parties to win more seats.

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/02/18/av-does-not-necessarily-produce-coalitions-and-may-not-help-smaller-parties/?pfstyle=wp>

February 18, 2011



With most opinion polls rising levels of support for changing the voting system in May, some pro status quo commentators are getting quite desperate for things to say to knock the Alternative Vote. The Telegraph columnist Simon Heffer recently claimed that AV will always lead to more coalition governments, and claims that the system makes it easier for small parties to win seats. In the first of a regular series where we try to keep the facts straight in the run-up to the referendum, [Patrick Dunleavy](#) shows how neither of these arguments has any basis in fact.

When you are the chief columnist of a powerful newspaper, you often have to simplify – but you really should not make stuff up off the top of your head. Writing in the *Daily Telegraph*, and clearly rattled by recent opinion polls showing that most voters mean to endorse change in the AV referendum, [Simon Heffer](#) seems to have rather lost his grip. According to him “AV is a recipe for coalitions – reason enough to vote ‘No’”.

At present a single party government is formed when one party has *the most votes* in over half the UK’s constituencies. Under AV a single party government will need [over half the votes in over half the constituencies](#). This is a higher threshold, and so when UK voters have not clearly made up their mind to elect one party into power, AV may produce more coalitions – as in 2010, 2005 perhaps, maybe 1992, 1974 (both elections), 1964 and 1950. But minority governments, short-lived tiny majorities or coalition government happened anyway in six of these eight cases, except for 1992 and 2005.

When voters have clearly decided to elect one party into government, such as 1983, 1987, 1997 and 2001, then AV will not somehow produce coalitions. It will do exactly the opposite. In 1997, for instance, [detailed research](#) by LSE shows that the Labour’s majority under Tony Blair would have been greater under AV, and the unpopular Tories would have shrunk to only 165 seats (far fewer than they retained under first past the post). And the 1980s Conservative majorities at Labour’s expense would also have been larger under AV.

To his credit, even Simon Heffer knows this is true, although somehow this message never reached his headline writer. Heffer also manages to turn this into another cause of complaint about AV, writing: ‘AV could have the perverse effect of securing a landslide for one of the two main parties, with the damaging effects on the parliamentary process that we saw between 1997 and 2005’. Yet what is so ‘perverse’ about a party with a majority of votes in a majority of constituencies having a majority of seats in Parliament? And cross-national experience bears out this probability. In Australia, over the past 90 years, the Alternative Vote has resulted in fewer hung parliaments than we’ve had in the UK.

Finally Simon Heffer claims that under AV it will be easier for small parties to elect MPs.

‘[I]t will be easier for parties that are not Labour or the Conservatives to

win seats at Westminster. There would not just be Lib Dems, but also Scottish and Welsh separatists, Greens, possibly even one from Nick Griffin and his chums. Therefore we would have more highly successful, productive and happiness-inducing coalitions like the one with which we are currently saddled’.

This argument makes no sense at all. AV elections can only be won by a party that gets 50%+1 of all local votes. So how can *raising* the threshold for winning seats make life easier for the BNP, UKIP or the Greens? Smaller party candidates will at least be able under AV to show they can win *some* support. But candidates that are too divisive to reach out to the majority of voters simply won’t have any future at all in terms of winning seats.

So introducing AV will *strengthen* the ability of strong winning parties to form majority governments. But it will *prevent* parties with no clear votes lead from being gifted with ‘fake’ majorities. Under AV a majority government would be based on majority support from voters in a majority of constituencies, which might come close to being majority support taken across the country as a whole. Paradoxically even the [fanatical equalization of constituency sizes](#) (which the Tories have promoted as their quid pro quo for having a referendum at all) will tend to bring this elusive goal closer than ever, if UK voters say ‘Yes’ in the 5 May referendum.